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ABSTRACT

To demonstrate how discourse tasks can differ in their cognitive difficulties, students in a graduate course on the teaching of writing participated in a procedure called "invisible writing." The purpose was to show the students that as they took on more cognitively demanding writing tasks, their ability to produce coherent discourse would be increasingly impeded by their inability to look back over their developing text. However, as the level of difficulty was raised from task to task, the students continued to insist that they found invisible writing no impediment to their thinking or to the coherence of the texts they were producing. This result suggests that writers who cannot look back over their sentences will retain them in their mind in a form resembling a reader's memory of the sentences that have already been read as they move forward through a text. From this it would seem reasonable to suppose that writers blocked by their verbal self-consciousness or by a tendency to compulsive overediting will find that invisible writing allows them to produce coherent first-draft prose more rapidly and copiously than they would have otherwise thought possible. Or, invisible writing may be used as a diagnostic instrument to see to what extent wandering attention or the distractions of premature editing are impediments for writers who seem unable to produce satisfactory quantities of prose in a single setting. (Appendixes include a scale of intellectual ascent for discourse, a sequence of writing tasks, and three writing samples from the invisible writing experiment.) (HOD)

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Invisible Writing: An Intervention for Examining Cognitive Processes in Composition

Virtually all composition researchers take it for granted that re-reading or scanning back over what one writes at intervals during the production of a text is an essential feature of the composing process. As I compose these sentences in a first draft preparing to utter them eventually before an audience of my colleagues, I find myself pausing at the end of each sentence to read back over what I have written. No doubt, all of us do some such re-reading as we write--either at the ends of phrases or sentences or sometimes after somewhat larger chunks of meaning.

James Britton who has observed re-reading even in young children has conjectured that it is necessitated by the writer's desire to monitor his emerging text in order to catch errors, and by the cognitive demands of continuous discourse. Without looking back, a writer cannot keep track of the development of his thought or of the connections between his thoughts. Britton further hypothesizes that re-reading is increasingly necessary as a writer takes on more intellectually demanding tasks in his writing.

To test these assumptions Britton and three of his London Institute colleagues conducted an informal experiment on themselves in which they took on a

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series of increasingly difficult writing tasks using worn out ball point pens and carbon paper. Thus they couldn't see what they were writing but could later see what they had written. Here is what Britton reports as the result of the experiment:

> We were acutely uncomfortable. When we wrote letters to an absent member of the team about what we were doing, and when we reported recent experiences in a straightforward narrative, we were able to complete the task with only a few blunders; but when we tried to formulate theoretical principles, even on a topic very familiar to us all, and when we tried to write poems, we were defeated. We just could not hold the thread of an argument or the shape of a poem in our minds, because scanning back was impossible. As we expected, the carbon copies showed many inconsistencies and logical and syntactical discontinuities. They were, in fact, useless.

Since Britton's experiment seemed to me an excellent way of demonstrating how different discourse tasks can differ in their cognitive difficulties, I decided to use what I came to call "invisible writing" as a laboratory procedure for my graduate course in the teaching of writing. I wanted to show my students that as they took on more cognitively demanding writing tasks, their ability to produce coherent discourse would be increasingly impeded by their inability to look back over their developing text. Like many classroom demonstrations of textbook theories, this one turned out not to demonstrate what it was supposed to.

As I raised the level of difficulty from task to task my students continued to insist that they found invisible writing no impediment to their thinking or to the coherence of the texts they were producing. Several reported that under the experimental conditions they found themselves able to write more productively and with greater satisfaction than usual. The invisibility of the text seemed to force them to give more concentrated and sustained attention to their emerging thoughts than

they usually gave when writing. This seemed to be especially true for writers who reported that ordinarily in their writing they had a hard time keeping their attention focused on a single line of thought beyond the boundries of one or two sentences.

Invisible writing also felt particularly efficacious to writers who reported that their usual practice in first draft composing was to frequently interrupt the flow of their thought to edit the syntax or diction of their developing text. The experiment suggested to these writers that their usual practice obstructs the fluency of their thinking and dilutes their concentration. Under the constraining conditions of the experiment they could neither edit, nor rewrite, nor allow their attention to stray from the line of thought they were developing. If they allowed their attention to wander at all from their developing thought--not able to look back to see where they had been--they were lost. Hence their more intense and sustained concentration.

If no one has bothered until now to challenge Britton's claims about the necessity of re-reading, it is probably because they seem commonsensically right--so consistent with what we all know from our own experience as writers. My failed demonstration for my students of principles I had taken to be beyond question, however, now called for a re-examination of Britton's assertions about the role of re-reading and a more systematic application of his experimental procedure.

To test Britton's assertions by repeating his experiment in a more systematic way I constructed a sequence of writing tasks based on Moffett's Piagetian view of the development of intellectual and discourse abilities. According to Moffett, intellectual development may be described as a process of decentering--outward in perspective, away from the sensory perceptions of the here and now and upward in abstractiveness away from the fragmentary data of isolated experiences. Within this framework a discourse task may be said to be cognitively more advanced as it demands that a writer (or reader) call into play developmentally more advanced

faculties (sense perception → memory → reason) in the interest of knowledge that is increasingly distant from concrete experience in the present moment.

I have prepared appendices (see below) to show my own attempt at schematizing Moffett's theory for use in developing a set of discourse tasks calibrated according to their intellectual difficulty. These include a copy of the invisible writing prompts I have used on four different occasions with different groups of teachers--always with results similar to those I obtained in my first rough and surprising experiment. So you can see what sort of data I am basing my present observations on, I have also appended some samples of the writing produced under the experimental conditions.

Among the most surprising findings to come out of my experiments are the reports of some of the writers that the invisible writing procedure felt increasingly helpful to them as they engaged in increasingly demanding writing tasks. That is the reverse of what we might expect. It makes sense, however, when we consider how invisible writing is a constraint that helps both to fix attention and to free it. It fixes attention on the writer's thought--what Vygotsky or Moffett would call his "inner-speech"--at the same time that it frees the writer from attending to anything except his thought.

The invisibly composing writer cannot look back on a trail of words to mark the progress of his thinking as he writes. He must hold the already articulated portions of his thought in his mind as he continues to develop each separate thought and the flow of connected thoughts that constitute his discourse. This extra burden on the writer's memory is likely to improve the quality of his thinking by keeping him attentive to his thoughts at a level that may be deeper than the surface structure of the words he would otherwise be able to read on the page. It may be that, unable to depend on his own written sentences as cues to his thinking, the invisibly composing writer can tap something closer to the well-springs of his thought--his "inner-speech"

or even what Sondra Perl has called a "felt sense" of meaning--something deeper than his written sentences would give him access to.

It seems plausible to suggest that the writer who cannot look back at his sentences will retain them in his mind in a form resembling a reader's memory of the sentences he has already read as he moves forward through a text. Research in reading has found that a reader forgets the surface structure of each sentence within seconds after reading it, retaining its content in memory in the form of its semantic propositions--a form which may be said to represent the underlying cognitive structure of a thought--something closer to pure meaning than ordinarily realized sentences. We might conjecture then, somewhat paradoxically, that invisible writing may help a writer to think more deeply and purely in his composing because his words are less likely to get in the way of his thinking.

Invisible writing may purify the act of composing in another sense as well. Unable to see what he has written, the invisibly composing writer may find himself extraordinarily liberated from having to attend to the manner in which he is presenting himself; to the sound of his voice, to the elegance of his utterance, to whether he appears intelligent or dull. He may even be relieved of having to attend, more generously, to the needs of his auditor; to the readability of his prose, to the reader's capacity to follow the line of an argument, to possible ambiguities in the meaning conveyed. In short, invisible writing may prevent the writer from being both reader and writer as he writes. Writing invisibly, one can only write. And only writing--writing without the self-consciousness or consciousness of an "other" that comes from reading as one writes--may make the act of writing more nearly that of pure thinking.

The cost of engaging in the conventionally double act of writing (or speaking) for oneself and for one's auditor--of writing and reading as one writes--may become increasingly obstructive to a writer's thinking as the thinking required by a topic

for discourse becomes cognitively more difficult. That is because tasks that are cognitively more difficult make more exclusive demands on our attention. This is evident in the unselfconscious speech of children who, talking about topics that strain their cognitive capacity, will frequently fail to attend to the needs of their conversational partners. Talking about a more familiar or less complex topic, the same children will appear to be socially more competent. Similarly, when an adult speaker in conversation thinks through a difficult idea, he may avoid eye contact with his auditor or neglect other conventional signals of mutual affiliation. These social failures do not indicate any communicative incompetence on the part of the speakers. They merely show how our limited resources for attention in the production of language may be strained by the cognitive burden of a difficult topic for discourse.

It makes sense, then, that the writers participating in my invisible writing experiment would have found the experimental procedure more helpful to their composing as they took on the more cognitively advanced discourse tasks. That is because as they progressed along the sequence of tasks, their success in responding to the assigned topics depended increasingly on their capacity to focus their thinking and to recover their thoughts as directly as possible, with as little interference as possible from the process of moving from inner-speech to its external expression.

The more complicated and original and penetrating our thinking becomes, the more volatile and elusive it is likely to be--the more subject to flight before we can capture it in the grasp of our words. Our most fugitive thoughts require the most unmediated recovery. We need to capture them whole, not in pieces. If we shift our attention to mending the inelegance of our utterance, to look for the best word instead of the word nearest at hand, or even to attend to the needs of our auditors, we may lose the last half of our emerging thought before we have netted the first. Hence if we are able to purge ourselves of our concern with the surface features of our utterance, with the impression we may be making, or even with how

lucidly we are elaborating our ideas for a reader, we may be better able to make more immediate contact with the whole of our most elusive thoughts and recover them more surely in the net of our language for our subsequent examination and emendation. Invisible writing may help us purge our composing of most of the pitfalls of vanity and other-directedness. To that extent it may help us improve our access through writing to our most penetrating and subtle thoughts.

The power of invisible writing to keep a writer's attention focused on his emerging thought points to what are probably its most significant potential uses for instruction. Invisible writing might, first of all, be used as a diagnostic instrument to see to what extent wandering attention or the distractions of premature editing--rather than a paucity of ideas--are impediments for writers who seem unable to produce satisfactory quantities of prose in a single sitting.

What is at first a diagnostic procedure may then become a therapeutic method for improving the fluency of student-writers who have become, in Robert Zoellner's phrase, "scribal stutterers." It seems reasonable to suppose that writers blocked by their verbal self-consciousness or by a tendency to compulsive overediting will find that invisible writing allows them to produce coherent first-draft prose more rapidly and copiously than they would have otherwise thought possible. Such a change is also likely to yield more satisfying prose--prose that retains much of the freshness and force of spontaneous speech. Through practice in invisible writing blocked writers might gain the confidence and experience they need to trust the advantages (often cited by expert writers) of postponing their editing until they have discovered and expressed their thoughts in a voice recognizably their own.

These classroom applications of invisible writing remain to be tested. In the meantime, I suspect that many teachers will find it useful to experiment with the procedure in basic and advanced writing classes. I would not advocate that any students use invisible writing on a regular basis, but I believe almost every writer

can learn something about his own ordinary composing processes by experimenting once or twice with the invisible writing procedure.

For those who feel confident that what I have described could not be applicable to their own composing processes--especially not in the composition of such intellectually demanding prose as we English teachers are obliged to produce--let me read a confessional passage that I wrote some months ago while drafting a journal article based on the same research I have reported in this paper:

> Here I must confess that even now as I write these sentences--as throughout the composition of this essay--I find myself smitten by disbelief in my own claims about the efficacy of invisible writing, especially as I begin to compose a difficult passage, to struggle to articulate an idea that I do not yet fully possess. At such moments I become convinced of the impossibility of ever managing to proceed without constantly reading back over what I have been writing. The more refractory and complex my idea, the more I find it necessary to pause and re-read as I progress--circling back upon my thought in each sentence to review its beginning before I move ahead to its conclusion.
>
> I have become so dubious about my own claims as I have written this essay, that upon occasion I have determined to test them by using the invisible writing procedure myself to compose the next passage where I find myself unsuccessfully struggling to fashion my thoughts into coherent prose. Yet when I take up my empty pen and carbon paper and use them in composing, I find I am always able to negotiate the problem passage more directly and successfully than I could before. And behold, that is how I have been composing these very words--the paragraph ending here and the one before it.

Finally, I should point out that I have experimented recently--on a very limited basis--using invisible writing with college-age basic writers. The results, at least at first glance, were disappointing.

There is considerable evidence from earlier research by Sondra Perl and others that poor writers tend to sabotage their own writing processes by editing too much and too soon as they write--thereby obstructing their fluency and interrupting the development of their ideas. My experience in using invisible writing with competent writers suggested that non-fluent basic writers might benefit from not being able to distract themselves with editing. I have some indication, however, that at least some poor writers may find the constraints of invisible writing not liberating but burdensome--an additional obstacle to be overcome in trying to translate thoughts into written language.

These tentative findings are lent additional weight by a fascinating and carefully executed study by Margaret Atwell of Indiana University. Atwell had ten good writers and ten remedial writers compose an impromptu personal essay in the middle of which they had to switch from ordinary pens and paper to what she calls "blind writing" (using the same procedure I have described). The switch seems to have had very little effect on the prose of the skilled writers, but it exaggerated most of the weaknesses of the poor writers.

The difference, it seems, has to do with the way poor writers engage in the composing process under ordinary circumstances. That is to say, the kinds of writers whom we identify as remedial or basic skills writers (in high school or college) seem to write with a very local focus of attention, exhibiting very little sense of a text-level plan or intermediate mental schemes which might guide them in the production of their sentences or in the direction of their thought. Annette Schneider reported in a paper at this conference that in their re-reading unskilled writers re-scanned (on the average) only four words compared to an average of twenty words for skilled writers. Studies of the revision processes of poor writers reveal the same sort of low-level orientation. Lacking a whole-discourse sense of what they are getting at in their writing, basic writers review by tinkering with words and they compose

by constantly consulting what they have just said as the only basis for what they will next say. Deprived of the ability to re-read their previous sentences, they have no resources for generating subsequent sentences to form a cohesive discourse.

Competent writers, on the other hand, seem to be in possession of a larger sense of the semantic structure of their discourse and of an internalized plan which guides them in generating and connecting the substructures of their text. Deprived of the ability to read back over what they have already written, these writers can rely on such mental schemes to guide them.

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Appendices

I. Scale of Intellectual Ascent for Discourse

TEMPORAL ASPECTS	DISCOURSE ACTS	INFORMING FACULTIES	EXAMPLES
What is happening	describing recording	discourse organized by the senses	field notes love notes diary entries
What happened (or will happen)	reporting narrating (or planning)	discourse organized by memory (chronological thinking)	memoirs news reports summaries of field notes plans
What happens	generalizing (using examples) explaining analyzing classifying advising from experience	discourse organized by analogical reasoning--the capacity to recognize a basis for excluding and including instances into classes and categories; i.e., generalizations	history scientific inquiry and explanation literary analysis prudential wisdom
What might happen What should happen	arguing (using reasons) advising from theory speculating theorizing disputing	discourse organized by the formal logic of argument or by the "tautologic" that generates new theoretical frameworks yielding new perspectives and arguments	professional advice and speculation literary theory philosophical and scientific theories and proofs legal argumentation

II. A Sequence of Writing Tasks

(Do one in each category)

Task I (5 minutes) What is happening

A. Write an account of what's going on right now around you or within you.

B. Write a note to someone expressing your love, anger, disappointment, resentment, or appreciation.

C. Write a diary entry focusing on a fear, hope, or regret.

Task II (7 minutes) What happened (or will happen)

A. Write a brief memoir of a childhood romance or about some other childhood experience.

B. Tell about a fight you had with someone close to you.

C. Tell about some plan you have for the immediate or distant future.

D. Write a report on a recent professional activity you participated in; e.g., a class you taught, a workshop you conducted, a meeting you attended.

Task III (10 minutes) What happens (or should happen)

Select a topic from A or B

A. Give advice to someone about to do one of the following:

1. Get married/begin a relationship
2. Get divorced/end a relationship
3. Become a teacher
4. Become a parent
5. Begin anything you know about

B. Write on one of the following topics:

1. The benefits and dangers of daydreaming
2. The wisdom and folly of reflecting on the past
3. How we can hate the ones we most love
4. What many people want from a relationship is what no one can ever give them
5. The problems of student-writers

Task IV (7 minutes) Write a poem.

III. Three Writing Samples from the Invisible Writing Experiment

Becoming a Parent

Becoming a parent involves more risk than anything I know of. You do not know if you're succeeding or failing until it's too late to correct the mistakes. Often your role must be negative with virtually no positive feedback. Appreciation is non-existent all during the hard work phase. For many years you will be devoid of independence. Fie some will say. It's not that bad. Think again. Until the child is independent, your life is not your own. Sure, you may have time away, but only if the babysitting arrangements work. If the babysitter gets sick who is responsible? You!

Not only does parenting require risk and responsibility, it lays tremendous loads of guilt on your shoulders. If something goes wrong, society and THE EXPERTS agree that it's due to faulty parenting. Everyone knows that the damage begins while the child is in the womb. The mother's eating, drinking, etc., influences the child. The more we learn about parenting, the heavier the guilt. Soon we'll need saints instead of parents.

Daydreaming

Daydreaming can serve a variety of purposes. When one is "understimulated" by the present surroundings, daydreaming can provide creative fantasy and rewarding escape. Daydreaming can also be a time of self-integration, a time to reflect on past experiences and plans for the future. When my oldest son was 6 and 7, he spent a great deal of time daydreaming--often not being able to finish assignments in class. His worst problem was in working

on reading comprehension worksheets as homework. He would agonize for hours, sometimes on a single question. In talking with (illegible). I never knew if I was asking him to do something which was less important than his daydreaming.

TEACHING

The students write
and outside
the full white moon
in a misty space
in a black heaven
hangs over the harbor.

The juxtaposition
tells me
once again
that existence precedes essence.

Maybe until those students
recognize that their experiences
can be the stuff of poetry,
they will always be
struggling with words,
while the full white moon
in a misty space
in a black heaven
hangs over the harbor.